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LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA UNIT

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SUBJECT: Electoral War Heats up -- Jazeera and Furat
Channel Feuds Spark Demonstrations in Baghdad

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the most notable example of the intensified electoral debate in the media, a candidate's complaints on al-Jazeera about the "meddling of" Shia clergy in Iraqi politics sparked condemnations by Shia Islamist media outlets and provoked demonstrations in Baghdad December 14. Outlets of all stripes -- except perhaps al-Fayha TV -- appear to have violated IECI rules governing media behavior which banned political ads as of December 14. The IECI confirms there have been violations, but assures the public the voting process remains credible. Sharqiya and Fayha TV have provided the most balanced coverage, with KDP (Barzani), SCIRI (Hakim), and IIP (Tarik al-Hashemi) outlets showing the least regard for media ethics. New groups, including some insurgents, have used the media to promote voting and/or non-violence. END SUMMARY.

Media Frenzy Begins December 13

2. (U) Voting and electoral coverage ramped up again December 13 to cover voting by Iraqis in hospitals, detention facilities, military bases and overseas. Channels pulled out all the stops to drum up support and participation. Most newspapers stopped publishing December 12, so voters turned to television. Most channels devoted 50-75 percent of their airtime to the election. Themes included motivational and informative public service announcements, paid advertising for candidates and lists, and debates and talk shows, with the debate becoming more heated in the final stretch of the campaign.

Al-Jazeera Sparks a War with Shia Islamist Channels

3. (SBU) The media debate took an unexpected turn December 14 with a heated war of words between Shia Islamist outlets and pan-Arab al-Jazeera. "Opposing Viewpoints" featured a moderated debate between Fadil Al-Rabia' (exiled Iraqi author) and Fuad Al Samawwi, an Iraqi politician. Rabia' made the following points: the U.S. had erred by handing Iraq's government to forces controlled by the Marja' (Shia Islamic religious authorities), which kills and tortures Iraqis through the Badr brigades; Iraq has a reactionary religious government; the clerics are scaring citizens by telling them it's a sin not to vote; the government has legalized occupation.

4. (U) Samawwi countered: Iraq is not like Iran because it does not have the system of velayat-i-faqih (guardianship of the jurist, which advocates for an interventionist role of clerics); the Marja' is a safety valve for Iraq; occupation came from Arab countries and clerics in Saudi Arabia; if you vote for the candle (555) list, God will be with you. While the moderator clearly favored Rabia's point of view, the station presented alternate, albeit very emotional, points of view

5. (U) After the show aired, al-Furat TV (associated with SCIRI and the United Iraqi Coalition, 555) reported that al-Jazeera "violated the sacred position of Imam al-Sistani;" viewers called to condemn the channel as the mouthpiece of "Ba'athists and Salafists." One caller noted "Sistani needs to just give us the word and we'll put an end to these Jazeera reports." The presenter cautioned moderation, advising "you don't need a sign from Sistani, just go and vote for the right people and that will solve the problem."

6. (SBU) By mid-afternoon, al-Furat and al-Iraqiya reported that tribal sheikhs, clerics, and officials condemned al-Jazeera. Both stations ran reports of demonstrations in al-Rashdiya, Husainya and Bab al-Sham (Shia neighborhoods in Baghdad suburbs). An embassy employee phoned in to say there were pro-Sistani demonstrations in Haifa Street. Secular Shia al-Fayha also condemned al-Jazeera, noting that the station "was well known for hurting people with its impolitic manner of discussing sensitive issues. Iraqi politicians should boycott it . . . because it is inciting violence."

Sunnis No Saints

17. (SBU) Sunni stations both commercial and party-funded, pan-Arab and Iraqi) focused on urging the "departure of occupation forces" and putting an end to Iranian meddling. There were possibly inappropriate religious references to guide voters. Baghdad TV (Iraqi Islamic Party) superimposed on its screen the Koranic verse "tomorrow is close for those who wait," implying that Sunnis should go to the polls to seek revenge (presumably against the Shia-led government). Baghdad TV on the 13th also aired an ad which depicted a snake curling out of Iran to encircle Iraq. Likewise, Baghdad TV was the only channel we monitored carrying AFP reports about the discovery by police in Wasit province of a truck entering from Iran with fake ballots.

Sharqiya Gives Airtime to Rebut Furat TV

18. (SBU) The Sunni-Shia (or secular/Islamist) tension carried over to Sharqiya, which December 14 became the "Voice Against al-Furat TV." Al-Sharqiya reported that Aziz Al-Yasiri, head of the Iraqi Democratic Current (772 list), denied media rumors that his list had joined the 555 list. Yasiri phoned in to condemn "an unnamed channel" (al-Furat TV) for making false claims.

19. (U) Sharqiya also carried denials of PM candidate Hazim al-Sha'alan, of the National Forces Parliament (511 list), that his list had withdrawn from the race. Sha'alan said he had forwarded complaints to the IECI. The gripes were not just inter-ethnic. Mohammad Jassim Khudayer, the head of the (Shia) Islamic Da'wa Movement 553 list (and ironically the deputy director of al-Iraqiya TV) also turned to Sharqiya to deny rumors that his list had withdrawn from the race. He demanded that the IECI put an end to media violations.

Violence and Claims of Fraud Featured on Most Media

10. (U) There were several claims of violations of IECI regulations governing media coverage. U.S. sponsored al-Hurra was apparently among the violators. We received a call late December 14 from Maysoon Ad-Damlooji (the deputy Minister of Culture) who alleged that al-Hurra was airing an interview with Hussein Shahrastani stumping for the Shi'a list 555, in violation of the IECI's ban on political broadcasts as of December 14. Ironically, there were reports in independent al-Dustoor on December 13 that Damlooji herself violated IECI regulations by bringing theater and cinema contacts from the ministry to meet with Allawi and received payments for their effort.

11. (U) Al-Arabiya broke the news of the death of Tawfeeq al Yasiri (Sunni candidate) in Ramadi December 13; however the station rebroadcast an old interview in which Yasiri accused the MOD and MOI of planning his arrest, apparently trying to implicate the government in Yasiri's death.

12. (U) Sharqiya reported that gunmen assassinated candidate Mizhir al-Dulaymi in Ramadi on 13 December. They aired an interview with Ayad al-Samarrai (IIP) in which he noted that violence will not prevent Iraqis from voting. Still, Dulaymi said voters expected fraud by the government and he condemned the use of religious symbols in the campaign. Sharqiya also seems to have violated the "blackout." One contact reports the station carried a press conference of Prime Minister Ja'aferi during the blackout; the station also replayed an interview with Al-Sharif Ali Bin Hussein mid-day on the 14th.

13. (U) Most stations carried warnings by Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Unified Iraqi Coalition [UIC] list, that he feared attempts vote-rigging. Iraqiya gave more details, noting that Hakim said his party would "not remain silent about vote-rigging" like it did in January.

14. (U) Moqtada Sadr supporters also turned up the heat, possibly violating IECI rules against incitement. Hadi al-Amiri, secretary general of the Badr Organization, affiliated with Sadr, told al-Iraqiya that he did not accept the IECI decision to allow Ba'athists to take part in elections "even though the De-Ba'athification Committee opposed the candidacy of some Ba'athists." Amiri said that Badr would not accept the Ba'th Party and warned that his organization "might oppose their inclusion with force."

IECI Notes Media Violations, but
Says Overall Process is Sound

15. (U) The IECI announced December 14 that voting would begin in Iraqi at 7:00 am December 15. IECI official Abdul Hussein al-Hindawi denied reports of fake ballots entering Iraq from Iran. He also tried to allay concerns about

fraud. "It is impossible to guarantee the honesty of an electoral process unless you have honest electoral officials, monitors, and the UN." He noted all three were in place for this election. He said 6280 electoral centers had been set up with 33,000 voting stations. Hindawi also indicated that "some entities violated the media blackout period; they will be punished and their names will be announced this evening." The IECE called on the government to remove electoral posters before voting begins.

Overseas Voting

16. (U) Most channels carried extensive coverage of overseas voting, especially al-Iraqiya and the Kurdish channels (KurdSat and KurdistanTV). Sharqiya reported December 13 that "Iraqi expatriates in 15 Arab and foreign countries headed to polling centers to choose new members for the Iraqi parliament." Al-Iraqiya reporters in Amman said turnout there was higher than in January. Iraqiya also ran stories promoting Iraqi security forces' capabilities to secure election sites.

More Calls for Restraint and Participation from all Sides

17. (U) Insurgent groups joined key religious figures to urge if not voting at least non-violence; this should boost turnout. Sharqiya carried statements of the Islamic Army in Iraq (an insurgent group) asking followers to not attack electoral centers. At the same time, the group said it does not support the political process.

18. Al-Arabiya TV on 13 December interviewed by phone Ahmad Abd-al-Ghafur al-Samarrai, head of the Sunni Waqf in Iraq. Samarrai said that a large number of Sunni Muslim scholars issued a fatwa urging people to vote. Asked if he was concerned "that some Sunni areas have declared a state of emergency," Samarrai says the Iraqis are sensible and "they have realized the danger of non-participation."

19. (U) Sharqiya carried a statement by Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al Modarissy, an influential Shia cleric in Iraq's south, calling on Iraqis to participate in elections and to elect "the right people" to represent them.

Sharqiya and Fayha Strike the Best Balance

20. (U) Sharqiya and al-Fayha had the most balanced coverage in this intense election phase. Sharqiya aired ads for all sects and affiliations. These ran the gamut from home videos for a small Sunni party in Mosul to Allawi's sophisticated spiel. Sharqiya -- unlike Iraqiya -- also carried ads critical of the coalition. Salih Al-Mutlaq's Iraqi Accord Front aired an ad showing US tanks and bullets and blood on a wall, with the comment: "Iraqis did not suffer from the occupation, they suffered from its aftermath." At the same time, Sharqiya aired security promotions which are usually only seen on Iraqiya.

21. (U) Sharqiya aired a thoughtful interview with Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi (United Iraqi Coalition 555) List) in which he noted that "people who claim Iraq is splitting apart are wrong; Iraqis have been united for thousands of years. Concerns about natural resources are also misguided. In fact, Western areas are richer than the south. People who object to Kurdish federalism and federalism in other regions simply fear change. But we must move on, this experiment will work." Sharqiya may have been the only station to pull off direct debates between candidates, although not the most well known. They moderated debates with Ali Debbagh and Mohammed Jassim al-Khudayer (each the head of a second tier list) debating other candidates for office.

22. (U) Al-Fayha (privately financed, Shia, secular) also portrayed a wide array of opinions and information. One talk show host on the 13 reported that some coalitions tried to bribe voters, and the station carried interviews in which citizens complained about excessive campaign expenditures. It also aired an extensive interview with influential secular Shia editor of al-Sabah newspaper, Mohammed Abdul-Jabbar, in which he discussed the importance of public broadcasting and media freedoms. The station delved into tricky economic questions that received little attention in other outlets. Fayha also went public to condemn stations that broke the media blackout; it was the only station we monitored which appeared to respect all IEIC guidelines, while also trying to provoke thoughtful review of issues. It also condemned the al-Jazeera broadcast.